

Iran: A Nuclear Test Case

President Bush's recent visit to Europe took place in an atmosphere vastly different from that of his first term. Unlike the prelude to the Iraq war, this time, each side of the Atlantic seemed determined to minimize differences and seek areas of agreement. At the same time, an improved atmosphere is only a first step toward defining common policies. This is why the issue of nuclear weapons in Iran may well turn into a test case, either bringing the alliance closer together or rending it again when its dynamics brook no further procrastination.

The following questions must be answered with some urgency: When the allies proclaim that they oppose nuclear weapons for Iran, do they mean that these weapons are undesirable or that they are unacceptable? Do the allies intend to confine their efforts to diplomacy, or are they prepared for other measures if diplomacy fails, and how far are they willing to go on such a course? Is the opposition to the spread of nuclear weapons generic — does it extend even to fully democratic countries? Or is it because of the rogue quality of the regimes farthest advanced on the road toward acquiring nuclear weapons: Iran and North Korea?

The alliance needs, above all, clarity on the consequences of the next stage of proliferation. In the American view — which I share — the spread of nuclear weapons, especially into regions of revolutionary upheaval, will produce a qualitatively different world whose perils will dwarf the worst nuclear nightmares of the Cold War. Such a world is all too likely to culminate in a cataclysm followed by an imposed international regime for nuclear weapons.

All Cold War administrations navigated in the awful calculus of deterrence: the certainty that the decision to use nuclear weapons could involve tens of millions of casualties, coupled with the awareness that a demonstrated willingness to run this risk — at least up to a point — was essential if the world was not to be turned over to ruthless totalitarians. Deterrence worked because there were only two major players in the world. Each made comparable assessments of the perils to it from the use of nuclear weapons. But as nuclear weapons spread into more and more hands, the calculus of deterrence grows increasingly ephemeral, and deterrence less and less reliable. It becomes ever more difficult to decide who is deterring whom and by what calculations. Even if it is assumed that aspirant nuclear countries make the same calculus of survival as the established ones with respect to initiating hostilities against each other — an extremely dubious judgment — new nuclear weapons establishments may be used as a shield to deter resistance, especially by the United States, to terrorist assaults on the international order. Nor is it certain how nuclear powers will react to nuclear war on their doorstep. Finally, the experience with the "private" proliferation network of apparently friendly Pakistan with North Korea, Libya and Iran demonstrates the vast consequences to the international order of the spread of nuclear weapons, even when the proliferating country does not meet the formal criteria of a rogue state.

For all these reasons, it is the fact of further proliferation that needs to be resisted. The quality of a regime that undertakes proliferation compounds the problem and provides a sense of urgency, but it is not the decisive factor.

It is over how to resist the process of proliferation that disagreements are likely to occur within the Atlantic Alliance. Our allies tend to view diplomacy as the principal tool and to see in such a strategy the symbolic expression of their preferred — if not exclusive — reliance on "soft" power. Some would rather face the perils of a proliferated world than the risks of avoiding it

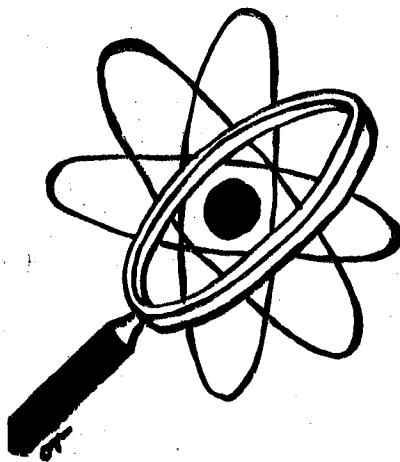
by common pressures. The administration holds the view that Iranian nuclear weapons are unacceptable in the literal sense and stresses the need for options beyond diplomacy. It affirms its support for a diplomatic course, though it has been reluctant to indicate a particular method for actively engaging itself — partly to keep open the option of regime change as a solution (a course most European leaders explicitly reject). Is it possible to merge the two approaches? Can the United States overcome its reluctance to define the content of diplomacy and Europe can agree to a strategy of escalating pressures if diplomacy falters?

With respect to proliferation, the distinction between "soft" and "hard" power is elusive. Diplomacy is about demonstrating to the other side the range of both the benefits and the penalties of its policy options. No matter how elegantly phrased, diplomacy by its nature implies an element of pressure and a capacity for it, especially toward adversaries. One reason why European negotiators have made the limited progress they have on the nuclear issue with Iran is the implied threat of actions the United States might take in case of deadlock. The essential consultation between the United States and Europe should concern the timing and content of diplomacy and the strategy for measures beyond it, not their relative merits.

The diplomacy of nonproliferation is in large part about the use of time. The three allied countries conducting the negotiations — Britain, France and Germany — strive at the very least to gain time by erecting the maximum technical obstacles to building nuclear weapons. Iran seeks to reduce the time needed to complete a weapon, at a minimum to be in a position to extort new concessions periodically as the price for continuing its so-called restraint. The European negotiators are striving to generate a package of incentives to induce Iranian restraint. At the same time, there is a limit to the incentives that even the most passionate advocates of diplomacy should be prepared to offer lest they encourage proliferation to more and more countries as a means of extorting packages of similar benefits.

Iran insists that it has every right to aspire to acquiring nuclear technology, if only to enhance power generation. In fact, for a major oil producer such as Iran, nuclear energy is a wasteful use of resources. What Iran really seeks is a shield to discourage intervention by outsiders in its ideologically based revolutionary foreign policy. This is why Iran oscillates between extracting the maximum number of "incentives" from the European negotiators and profound suspicion of them. For the so-called incentives increase Iran's dependence on the states against which the proliferation is, in the end, directed; they imply an entry by Iran into a world order it has heretofore rejected.

For a coordinated policy to succeed, two conditions must be met: The purpose must be the verifiable denuclearization — at least in the military sense — of Iran. That — and not gaining time to delay American pressures — is the test of policy. Second, the European allies must be willing to consider measures beyond diplomacy if diplomacy deadlocks. Iran may well view diplomacy as a way to gain time, perhaps through the Bush administration's second term, in the meantime continuing to maneuver for a position from which there is only a short, final step to a nuclear weapons program. And it may try to pocket as many incentives of long-term usefulness to its economy and nuclear program as it can induce Western negotiators to offer, without taking the final step toward nuclear disarmament. Allied diplomacy should be designed to overcome these tactics and estab-



BY JOHN OVERMYER

lish criteria for verifiable denuclearization.

If, as President Bush repeatedly emphasized on his European trip, an intense diplomatic phase is about to begin, some kind of U.S. participation will be necessary, at a minimum with respect to the incentives part of the diplomacy and probably in its conduct as well. This is partly because reliance on regime change in Iran — however desirable in the abstract — to stop its nuclear weapons program may prove not relevant to the issue. Bringing about regime change could take longer than the time estimated for Iran's completion of its nuclear weapons program. And if the post-ayatollah regime insists on maintaining the weapons program — as seems probable — the nuclear dilemma will persist even after the mullahs are gone from the scene.

Such a course need not — indeed, it should not at this stage — take the form of a bilateral Washington-Tehran dialogue. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has called attention to the aspects of Iranian policy that impede across-the-board negotiations, including the support of groups relying on terrorism (such as Hezbollah) and the policy of fomenting instability in Iraq. But a framework similar to the Beijing six-party forum for dealing with the North Korean nuclear problem would serve to explore the viability of the diplomatic option.

During the Cold War, it was the settled policy of several administrations to use negotiations to explore the prospects for diplomatic progress, but at the same time to lay down markers to explain the stage at which confrontation became inevitable and the reason for it. At almost the same time he was calling the Soviet Union the evil empire, President Ronald Reagan wrote a letter to Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev inviting him to a dialogue. What must not happen is a repetition of the pattern preceding the Iraqi war: initial agreement on tactics succeeded by a crisis over strategy.

As the United States adopts more flexible tactics, our European allies need to understand that it is the insistence on the unacceptability of Iranian nuclear weapons that has provided perhaps the principal incentive for what little flexibility Iran has shown on the nuclear issue to date. In the end, we cannot grant a veto to other nations on matters affecting national security and global stability. But we can conduct policy in such a way that unilateral action emerges as a last resort.

A genuine allied nonproliferation policy must therefore achieve clarity on these issues: How much time is available before Iran has a nuclear weapons capability, and what strategy can best stop an Iranian nuclear weapons program? How do we prevent the diplomatic process from turning into a means to legitimize proliferation rather than avert it? What range of pressures is to be implemented if diplomacy fails? How do we determine that diplomacy has deadlocked? We must never forget that failure would usher us into an era of dangers dwarfing the nuclear perils and uncertainties surmounted in the Cold War.

The writer, a former secretary of state, is chairman of Kissinger Associates.